Weighing Costs, Weathering Risks: Adaptive Strategies of Fish Farmers Facing Multiple Risks in Northern Thailand

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ARTICLE INFO

History:
Draft: 29 Oct 2014

Draft. In prep.

Keywords:

Aquaculture,
Climate change,
Adaptive strategies,
Common-pool resources

ABSTRACT

Numerous studies on adaptive strategies focus on how actors make use of different capitals to handle livelihood challenges, but only a few investigate how actors think about strategies that will cost them in terms of time, capital, and labour as well as how actors mix strategies in time, space and scale to suit each challenging situations.This paper examines how fish-farming communities adapt to climate variability, market uncertainty and management intervention which have impacts on their livelihoods. Conceptualising adaptive strategies as practice, the author classify strategies into different groups including strategies to protect farm productivity, to improve livelihoods and to manage common-pool resources. Also strategic thinking processes are classified into three options: thinking about experimental costs, thinking about economic costs and thinking about social or transaction costs. Farmers' decision processes are studied at household and community levels. Peri-urban farmers from Ping and Ing river basins in northern Thailand are compared on the basis of their classification into fish farmers, crop-and-livestock farmers and non-farmers even though most of them hold both farm and non-farm occupations. Data are collected by in-depth interview, focus group interview, participant observation and field survey throughout cool, hot and rainy seasons from January 2013 to May 2014. Data analysis is done by a qualitative data analysis software. Individual farming households, when exposed to multiple risks, are found to choose strategies which minimise experimental costs in terms of money, labour, and time. They will maximise all available resources while generating new knowledge on adaptation. Most of small-scale farmers choose this option. If unsuccessful, they will shift to strategies which minimise all economic costs. Large-scale farmers tend to choose economic cost minimising option, whereas medium-scale farmers opt for a mixture of both experimental and economic costs. Nevertheless, when threats are related to common-pool resources which are beyond individual control, farmers turn to collective strategies that come with social costs or transaction costs. They have to mobilise and negotiate with other stakeholders at multiple scales to find solutions to such problems as water scarcity, water pollution, and river bank collapse. Collective-action problems reveal emerging needs to develop and strengthen institutions for managing rivers and state-led irrigation systems as common-pool resources.